



# THE WRECK OF THE *HMS* *SOMERSET* (III)

*British Man-Of-War,  
1746 - 1778*



The remains of *HMS Somerset* lie beneath the sands along the outer beach of Provincetown. She was a powerful third-rate line of battle British warship that helped shape the course of American history. With 64 mounted guns and a crew of 400, the *Somerset* brought British power to the North Atlantic and Mediterranean in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Her early missions included the Seven Years War (1756-63), known as the French and Indian War in North America. She played a pivotal role in helping the British capture Louisburg and Quebec from the French. During the American Revolution, her role in the rescue of British troops after the battles of Lexington and Concord, and the bombardment during the Battle of Bunker Hill, influenced the outcomes of both battles. After sailing in later military campaigns, an intense storm drove the *Somerset* onto the shallow Peaked Hill Bars on November 2, 1778.

## Aftermath of the Wreck

By the time the *Somerset* had wrecked, Cape Codders had suffered greatly from the British blockade during the American Revolution. Commercial fishing and whaling were virtually shut down. Some local people engaged in privateering and smuggling along the coast, while others turned to the land for subsistence. When the giant *Somerset* wrecked on the Cape, there likely was a strong emotional reaction by the local populace. According to the official account of the ship's captain, George Ourry, only 21 men were lost during the wreck.

(over)

Captain Ourry was forced to walk under guard to Providence, RI, where he was exchanged for 2 American officers. The officers and crew, numbering over 400, were escorted to Boston. Towns along the route provided militia to escort and support the prisoners. A tremendous amount of scarce war material was chopped or pried away from the wreck by Cape Codders before the state put a guard over what remained. Eleven 18- pound and five 9- pound cannon and powder were entrusted to Colonel Paul Revere to be used in fortifying Castle Island in Boston Harbor. Salvage of the *Somerset's* cargo was dangerous and difficult. Provisions in the lower hold were only accessible for a few hours a day at low tide. Severe winter storms in December finally broke the remains of the ship apart, moved it closer to shore, and eventually buried it under tons of sand. It took several more months of bitter court proceedings to sort out who owned what in the aftermath of salvage operations.

### **An International Treasure**

The remains of the *Somerset*, along with the timbers of thousands of other shipwrecks within the boundary of Cape Cod National Seashore, are preserved as federally protected archeological resources for future generations to research and study. Some shipwrecks have been documented by National Park Service archeologists, but most remain hidden under sand, or offshore. The *Somerset* is also protected under international law, and is the sovereign property of the United Kingdom. Since 1778, the *Somerset's* remains have only surfaced twice: once in the winter of 1885- 86, and again in 1973. The National Park Service preserves some of the large timbers from the wreck. In 2005, the park superintendent presented a few pieces of the *Somerset* to the commander and crew of the British navy's modern *HMS Somerset (IV)*. She is a Type 23 Frigate based in Plymouth, England. Ironically, she has spent most of her career fighting alongside the U.S. Navy in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. From the American Revolution, to today's war on terror, the story of the *Somerset* offers a moving lesson in cooperation between old naval foes who now work together as allies.

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printing of this  
publication  
funded by:

